THE THEATRICAL LIFE.

Those Who Make the Public Laugh and Weep.

Sorrows That Are Not Exhibited Before the Curtain—A Struggle for Existence—Earnings of Star Actors—Dramatic Art Rising.

"Now what does that mean?" I asked Mr. Johnario Smythilino.

It was an advertisement. It set forth that a popular and talented comedian was desirous of obtaining an engagement to play in a theatre in New York City during the coming season. The notice ended in this mysterious manner: "Salary no object."

"It means" said he, "that that is what the theatrical profession are coming to. We are bound for the bow-wows. Actors used to begin at the bottom of the ladder. If they worked hard and faithfully, they might hope for honorable recognition by and by. But all that has changed now. Our business has been swamped by amateurs and outsiders till there is no place for anybody. If you start in the ranks, you stay in the ranks. Stars do not graduate from the lower rounds any more. They are made by accident and advertising. They float in at the top. Half of them don't know anything. If a woman has a nice, quiet, lady-like manner, that's called acting now days. And the salaries of ordinary actors have come down fifty to seventy-five per cent. in the last few years."

"But I don't understand that," said I. "The public who patronize the theatres pay as much for admission as they ever did, even in war time. Theatres are better attended than they ever were before, too. Why do not the actors get good salaries?"

"It is competition that bring them down to starvation—competition among managers and among themselves. Our business follows the tendency of the age. A few people at the top get all the money and the rest go without any. There are larger earnings made on the stage than there ever were, but the managers and a few stars get it all."

Mr. Johnario Smythilino is himself a well known and popular comedian. If you heard his name you would know it at once. He has made you laugh like a child many a time. But the funniest men on the stage are sometimes those to whom, off the stage, life is very serious business. Did not brave old Thackeray say of the clown in the plays "He shows you when his mask is off a face that's anything but gay?"

"Yes," says Mr. S. "I've gone upon the stage and made an audience roar with mirth till some dropped over in their seats, and all the while I was in such trouble that I could have kicked them for laughing. I've fairly raised the roof off the house with a funny bit sometimes when I've had such a splitting headache that I could hardly see my way across the stage."

"How does a comedian get his training? Where does he learn his funny things?"

"A comedian must be born. He cannot be trained or made. The fun is in the shape of his face, the trick of a muscle. Look at me. What kind of a young lover would I make saying, 'O mee darling!' with this mouth?"

At that he gave a grin which sent his audience of one into convulsions.

"I don't doubt it," said I. "I believe every word after hat."

Mr. S. continued: "A leading man can be made. A funny man can't. A comedian can't be anything else very well, either. I tried it once. A good young lover has the best place in a stock company. I thought once to prepare myself for that. I spent a thousand dollars for training, gave it to a man who knew he could train me to take the part of a splendid young lover. I studied it; I played it; I was fired. Then I went back to my bald-headed wig and funny old man business."

"But it's ever so much better to make people laugh than to make love," I said. "It is the highest mission in life to amuse one's fellow-man. There is so much sorrow in the world."

"Yes, but how does it happen that the young lover always gets more money than the funny man?"

"I give it up."

"How does it happen, too, that the young lover makes all the mashes? Infatuated ladies send him mash letters by the hundred and fifty. The heavy villain gets them too, once in a while. But the funny man rarely ever receives a love letter? Why is that?"

Again I gave it up. If love-making and fun-making will not go together, why is it? Which is the best if we cannot have both?

"You have no idea what a change a little thing will make in an actor's face. When I start out next week all this mustache must come off. A comedian with a mustache loses his best point, which is his mouth. The most expressive feature of the face is the mouth."

"More so than the eyes?"

"Oh, my, yes! The eyes come next, however. One of my friends has a way of moving the muscles of the front of his chin up and down that never fails to bring down the house. Hardly any other man in America can do it, and he is known all over the country as the man with the 'Wagging Chin.'"

"A hard life? There is no business on earth to compare with it. An actor now-a-days is a tramp, a genteel tramp, that's all it amounts to. He must be on the road week in and week out. The traveling knocks him all to pieces. It takes all the life out of him. We finish playing in one town of a certain evening. We load up after the performance is over and go on to the next place. We railroad all night. There is no sleeper or parlor car for the company, mind you. Only the star and the manager get that. The stock actor must double up or hang upon the corner of a car seat any how he can. If he can sleep that way, very well; if not, it is all the same. He must be ready for rehearsal next morning and the play that night. An actor will sleep ten or fifteen hours at a stretch when he gets a chance, so worn out is he. So it goes on the season through. Our railway fare and baggage transportation are paid, that is all. We must pay our own board, and we are lucky indeed to get hotel rates at anything less than $2.50 a day. Only the stars can go to the swell hotels. They will not stop at the same house with their company. Some of them would not speak to one of their actors on the street. They wish to make out that they belong to another world."

"Stock actors lay up money? Heavens! Successful stars clear anywhere from $20,000 to $60,000 a year. In the old times $50 a night was a very good price for a star. You see from that how much things have changed. But as for the stock actor, his expenses have doubled and his pay has been cut down half. A good ordinary actor gets only from $30 to $60 a week. Out of that he must pay for his living, his dress and all other expenses. How much do you suppose will be left to support a family on?

"Then, too, the standard of dramatic art has been raised immeasurably in America in the last few years. The public used to put up with anything—pasteboard crowns and paper muslin satin. The same shabby old bit of scenery would do equally for the palace of the King of Denmark or a hay-making. That is all different, too. Now carloads of scenery must be transported with the company. Costumes must be rich and fitting and copied with historic accuracy."

"Well, that's a good indication, isn't it—a sign of the growth of artistic culture in the county?"

"Yes; it's a good thing for the public, but it nearly kills the actor. Under the present traveling theatrical system, the small towns get just as good entertainments as the large cities. Every town can now have its own hall and theater, and the companies come there and play. Why, look at Zanesville, Ohio, with its opera house that cost half a million dollars. Lima, Ohio, has a magnificent theater, too. That would not have been possible under the old system. But I tell you it's rough on the actor. It turns him into a mere wandering fakir, with no home or settled family ties. At the close of the season he comes to New York City, tramps Union square all summer, looking for another engagement. You will see dozens of actors promenading there any afternoon of July or August. We call it 'going on the Rialto.'

"Another hardship is that the theatrical season has been shortened. It used to run forty-four weeks, now thirty to forty is the limit. The actor goes in debt for his board during his idle months, and it takes all he can save through the season to square him up for his last summer's living. That done, he comes out at the end without a cent ahead, and repeats the experience. Oh, yes. An actor's lot is a happy lot, and there's a mint of money in it, as you see."

"Stars generally command their own prices. But even they do not roll in wealth always."

Lester Wallack is a most successful manager, but he can make no money outside of New York. He went starring a few years ago and failed.

"Our profession are now mostly in the hands of their worst enemies, the theatrical agents. We cannot do without them, and they are in league with the managers to break down theatrical salaries still further. Almost everybody who can stand upstraight is seized on and chucked in to fill a part, because he will go cheap. Consequently, dry-goods clerks, gamblers, waiters and chambermaids, and people who have made a failure at everything else make a rush for the dramatic profession in a drove. We are flooded and running over with would-be actors. Look at their experience in Romany Rye. The managers wanted to cut down pay below what any respectable, experienced actor would accept. So they took in a lot of the cheaps. There are twenty-three speaking people in the piece. They had a rehearsal. They fired five of their new company that time. At the second rehearsal they fired thirteen more. That made eighteen. Out of that cheap company of twenty-three there were only five left."

"Why do they keep that silly thing running week after week all summer at the —— theatre?" I asked suddenly; "Nobody goes to see it hardly."

"Just to say it ran in New York so many months. They'll play to gas money in order to say that. If a piece takes in New York its fortune is made. The metropolis settles the fate of a play or an actor. But the money in our business is made on the road, outside of the city."

"Are you so very, very bad, you theatrical people?"

Smythilino made a horrid face—one of his most killing stage faces.

"We're just like the rest of the world. Our people can easily behave themselves if they have a mind to. Most of them do. But there is this: If a young woman wants to go queer she has more opportunity for it in the theatrical profession than elsewhere. Actors are a superstitious lot; perhaps the uncertainties of their business make them so. There are such sudden ups and downs. They mostly fear the number thirteen, and they have a dread of spilling salt."

Smythilino mused and stroked the short, silky moustache which must be sacrificed this week.

"I'm afraid, too," said he, "that we use a frighful lot of slang. By the way, don't mention me. His royal jags is a tart old duffer, and some time when he is on a bat he might fire me." ELIZA ARCHARD.

NEW YORK, Sept. 22.

TO HER WHO KNOWS.

Because your eyes are blue, your lips are red,
And the soft hair is golden on your head,
And your sweet smiling can make glad the day,
And on your cheeks pink roses have their way
Should I adore you?

Since other maids have shining, golden hair,
And other cheeks the June's pink roses wear,
And other eyes can set the day alight,
And other lips can smile with youth's delight,—
Why bow before you?

But if the eyes are blue for me alone,
And if for only me the rose has blown,
And but for me the lips their sweet smile wear,
Then shall you mesh mein your golden hair,
I will adore you.

And as my saint, my soul's one shining star
That lights my darkness from its throne afar
As lights the summer moon the waiting sea,
With all I am, and all I strive to be,
I'll bow before you.

LOUISE CHANDLER MOULTON.

LONDON, Sept. 11.

He did not care for fame, says Richard Grant White. He refers to Shakespeare, and continues in this strain: "He was absolutely indifferent to that *ignis fatuus*, posthumous fame, having no thought in his mind or care on his heart what became of his compositions after he got his money for them." Whatever the rest of the world may think on this subject, Mr. White fully indorses Pope's pert couplet, in which he says that Shakespeare

"For gain, not glory, winged his roving flight.
And grew immortal in his own despite."

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—:o:—

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